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XVII.—DE QUINCEY AND CARLYLE IN THEIR RELATION TO THE GERMANS.

What is the importance of De Quincey in comparison with Carlyle in introducing German literature and thought into England? In dealing with this question I shall speak of the field of German writing from which De Quincey drew the material that he presented to his English audience; of the value of that material; of his method of presenting it; and of his attitude toward his work.

As to the field from which De Quincey drew, it was German prose. At the beginning of the article on Lessing, as early as 1826, he announced a series of specimen translations from writers of German prose. He says there that it is unfortunate that the English interest in German literature has settled so exclusively on the poets, for not in them so much as in the prose authors do the strength and originality of the German mind appear. The prose authors have not written under the constraint of foreign models,—a hit at Goethe,—nor manifested their freedom from that constraint by the affectations of caprice. De Quincey carried out this program of introducing the prose of Germany to England with a spasmodic faithfulness. He translated from Richter, from Kant, from Lessing, from Tieck; but from no poet. This was natural, for De Quincey's genius was a prose genius. Scott and Coleridge, as poets, translated German poetry or poetical dramas; De Quincey and Carlyle translated prose. Carlyle translated fiction—the *Wilhelm Meister*, and the various articles of his volume of *German Romance*; De Quincey translated fiction from Tieck and from other unknown or less important romantic and sentimental novelists, and he also translated considerable German criticism and

philosophy. But besides translating De Quincey wrote many abstracts and digests,—a point I shall take up in a moment in speaking of his method. In these digests, again, his material is of course prose; he takes themes from philosophy and criticism, and especially from the pedantic region of German scholarship. His *Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Origin of the Rosicrucians and the Free Masons (A Digest from the German)* is a case in point. So, too, his own works which have a basis in the German—as the *Flight of the Tartar Tribe*—are drawn from prose writers.

These translations and digests and other articles connected with the German may be considered both in their literary value and in their philosophical value, as introducing German literature and German thought to English readers. The translation of Tieck's *Love-Charm* is perhaps the only piece of prose of strictly literary quality which De Quincey has brought over from the German. The *Analects* from Richter can hardly be considered here, for they are too short, most of them only sentences of especial beauty; they convey nothing like a whole conception of any work of Richter's. The translation of the *Laocöon* also is not complete. I exclude likewise the several romances which De Quincey published as "from the German," for they are scarcely of enough importance for literature to be reckoned with. When we compare, then, the slight amount of strictly first class literary prose which he rendered accessible for the English with the substantial achievement of Carlyle in his *Meister* and the two volumes of *German Romance*, it becomes evident that De Quincey's claims as a translator can not stand beside Carlyle's. A basis for comparison between the two men offers itself also in the critical essays on German authors. In point of literary value Carlyle's work again must be preferred. De Quincey wrote his best criticisms on Richter and on Tieck, the latter a mere note in extent.

In these two articles one finds him a sympathetic critic, getting away from his own prejudices, giving a suggestive conception of his author and in some measure interpreting him to the reader. But in these articles even, his criticism is not intimate and detailed. The rest of his critical papers, with the further exception, perhaps, of what he says of *Die Räuber*, are unsympathetic, without detail, and utterly external in their tone. Over against these fragmentary and inadequate articles stands a body of criticism by Carlyle which is substantial, intimate, sympathetic; Carlyle has given the English reader an inspiring and illuminating interpretation of several German authors of the most representative type. His essays on Novalis (1829), Richter (1830), Schiller (1831), and Goethe (1832) are standard. Mr. Rhys says of them: "They still hold their own as at least the most vigorous and inspiring statement in English criticism of the great men of letters whose lives and writings they describe." Even the introduction to the translations from German romancers in 1827—the brief notices of Tieck, Richter, Fouqué, and Hoffmann—contain some passages of noteworthy critical value.

But if De Quincey's translation and criticism cannot be compared with Carlyle's in literary value, he has the advantage of being free from the rivalry of Carlyle in a whole field of German work; *viz.*, in the translations and digests of a philosophical and scholarly sort. And yet even here De Quincey's contribution is not of commanding importance. For, in the first place, articles of scholarly interest, such as the *Toilette of the Hebrew Lady*, the *Philosophy of Herodotus*, the *Origin of the Rosicrucians*, are without any special significance that makes it creditable to have transferred them from the German to English. There is nothing vitally important in this part of De Quincey's work; he has gratified his own rather pedantic and antiquarian taste, and at the

same time without the fatigue of an exhaustive investigation has produced a readable magazine article. Moreover, while the transference of German philosophy into England is of vital importance, De Quincey did not accomplish a great deal of it by his translations and digests. There are two ways in which the transcendental philosophy came into England: by what may be called the academic translation or setting forth of its books and its doctrines; and secondly by the living inculcation of the philosophy through the works of great English authors. De Quincey helped the movement chiefly in the academic way. His articles on Kant set forth in the abstract some of Kant's ideas, explained them, and (granting De Quincey's claim) cleared up obscurities in his expression, which had puzzled other students. But he did not by these articles vitalize Kant's philosophy or make it effective in English thought. One reason was that Kant's philosophy was after all barren for him; and he did not reach the constructive side of it, nor apparently did he grasp or sympathize with the later constructive development of Kantian philosophy into the ideal systems of the neo-Kantians. Leslie Stephen says of him: "He had an acquaintance, which if his opinion were correct, was accurate and profound, with Kant's writings and had studied Schelling, Fichte, and Hegel. He fancied that he could translate the technicalities of Kant into plain English; and that when so translated, they would prove to have a real and all-important meaning. But as nothing ever came of all this, it would be idle to deduce from his scattered hints any estimate of his powers" (*Fortnightly Review*, Vol. xv, old series, p. 324). Leslie Stephen with his love for the eighteenth century and its philosophers is hurt at De Quincey's scant regard for Locke, and is over hard on De Quincey in this article. In his later view of him in the *Dictionary of National Biography* article he speaks more

sympathetically. And yet he has come pretty close to the fact when he says that "nothing ever came of all this." Certainly little has appeared in De Quincey's works to show for all the years of his devotion to German metaphysics ; and, as I have said, the reason is that he failed to probe far enough to find in Kant that positively constructive element which his nature demanded.

Carlyle, on the other hand, while he did not translate anything, transfused the new philosophy into the substance of his *Sartor Resartus*, and in a thousand ways presented significant ideas from that philosophy throughout his works. For really putting German philosophy to work in England as a living factor in English thought, Carlyle must be given far greater honor than De Quincey.

De Quincey's method in his studies from the German is worth some few words. There is not very much evidence for the impression, but one certainly does get the impression that most of De Quincey's critical articles were composed on the spur of necessity after a long but torpid and profitless gazing at the work in hand. One feels that he has spent hours over his problem in a sort of nervous and impotent reverie ; and at the last moment written what he could,—as in the case of the proofs of Goethe, where the time had slipped away without his having been able to look at them with "any use or profit." He was fitted rather to study and dream over his book, to lose himself in it, and spin fine webs out of it that ran into such intricacy that he must let the whole tangle go and begin afresh. For many years he was a student without a thought or a desire of any written self-expression ; his opium habit no doubt confirmed him in his dreamy web-spinning nature and inhibited him from continued and concentrated effort toward the completion of his problem, so that he could present it as a whole. Hence much of his work is fragmentary. Again, he fre-

quently writes without his authorities at hand, and quotes inaccurately or roughly from books he has not read for years. In this way he quotes from Kant in an important connection, stating that fifteen years have elapsed since he read the passage ; or he will make use of a half quotation from some classical author ; and in one instance he explains that he is quoting from a book which he had never seen but once years before, and then only for a day. This indicates either mere bravado, or composition on short time and under difficulties.

Some of De Quincey's magazine writing came very near being hack work ; for while he was free to choose his themes he was constantly driven to write whatever he could squeeze out that would pass muster and bring in a little money. It is pitiful work by a man in pitiful straits, a man with a painstaking and artistic nicety unable to produce anything save a fragment. Carlyle writes of him to his brother (November 29, 1827) : " Poor little fellow ! It might soften a very hard heart to see him so courteous, yet so weak and poor ; retiring *home* with his two children to a miserable lodging house, and writing all day for the king of donkeys, the proprietor of the *Saturday Post*. I lent him Jean Paul's autobiography, which I got lately from Hamburg, and advised him to translate it for Blackwood, that so he might raise a few pounds and fence off the Genius of Hunger yet a little while. Poor little De Quincey. He is an innocent man, and, as you said, extremely *washable away*."

As for the method of De Quincey's translations and digests, he is quite frank usually in acknowledging his sources. His *Philosophy of Herodotus* is an article based on some investigations by a German named Hermann Bobrik on the *Geography of Herodotus*. This is the way De Quincey makes his acknowledgements : " What we propose to do is to bring forward two or three important suggestions of others not yet

popularly known—shaping and pointing, if possible, their application, brightening their justice, or strengthening their outlines. And with these we propose to intermingle one or two suggestions, more exclusively our own.” This shows De Quincey, the magazine writer, making himself an outpost reader for the general public, bringing in a report of new things of interest, and by his brilliant style making scholarly or dull treatises into readable magazine articles. He writes an exegetical comment on Herodotus’s notion of the course of the Danube, which is decidedly interesting, yet which for its substance might appear in one of the modern journals of ancient philology. In the work on the Rosicrucians and Free Masons he states that he has made an abstract of, rearranged, and improved the German work of Prof. J. G. Buhle (Göttingen, 1804). Similarly in the paper on the *Last Days of Kant*, De Quincey follows the biographies of Kant by Wasianski, and by Jachmann, Rink, Borowski, and others. It is noticeable, moreover, that in the critical papers De Quincey frequently quotes at some length from German critics. For example, he quotes Frau Herder and Richter on Herder for something more than half of the short article. He also quotes Schlegel on Lessing. Finally De Quincey has a way of using his general ideas on Germany and the Germans in contrast with France, and with England. Frequently in his essays not dealing with a subject which is especially German, as in the *Essay on Style*, or in the *Letter to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected*, he will contrast German and French style, German and French manners, or the social life and conversational habits,—all this a good deal after the model of Madame De Staël.

De Quincey, then, falls far below Carlyle as a champion of Teutonism, both in the literary and the philosophic value of his contribution, both in his direct translation from the German and in the indirect bringing over of German ideas

and moods. His method of dealing with his work lacks consistency and energy of endeavor ; he works at his German mine, of which he spoke in the early editorial in the *Westmoreland Gazette*, in a desultory, hand-to-mouth fashion, without definite plan. Carlyle struck for the richest lodes, and worked them thoroughly and energetically. He thus permanently enriched English life and thought with the best that could be brought over from the German mine ; De Quincey fetched some nuggets, and more quartz of little value, and here and there he carefully lugged home copper pyrites.

A suggestive comparison may be made, finally, between De Quincey and Carlyle as regards the attitude which each took toward his work. De Quincey enjoyed German literature for himself ; Carlyle felt that England *ought to know* about it. When De Quincey was driven to writing he used the knowledge of German that he had as a resource for helping him toward many a magazine article ; but his attitude in this writing is far different from the frank sincerity of Carlyle. He is constantly implying that he is a master of the German language and literature in a degree in which few others in England are ; and gives the impression that German must remain a closed book, except in so far as he himself opens it and explains random pages and here and there a foot-note. This is perhaps exaggerated, but it suggests the attitude toward which he inclines. Masson somewhere speaks of De Quincey's attitude in one of his articles on Greek literature : he says that he has gone into the temple of Greek literature, explored its mysteries, and after coming out and locking the door behind him, has stood on the steps and told the people that it is very fine inside, but it will do them no good because he alone has the key. There is just a tinge of this in De Quincey's attitude

toward his English public eagerly listening for words about the great German literature. It is very different with Carlyle. In his preface to his volumes of *German Romance* (1827), discouraged about most of his translations except that from Richter, he nevertheless says: "On the whole, as the light of a very small taper may be useful in total darkness, I have sometimes hoped that this little enterprise might assist, in its degree, to forward an acquaintance with the Germans and their literature; a literature and a people both well worthy of our study." And a little later he ridicules one who claims much virtue for having mastered the German language: "The difficulties of German are little more than a bugbear,—three months of moderate diligence will carry a man over its prime obstacles, and the rest is play rather than labor." He concludes: "To judge from the signs of the times, this general diffusion of German among us seems a consummation not far distant. As an individual, I cannot but anticipate from it some little evil and much good; . . . thirty millions of men, speaking in the same old Saxon tongue, and thinking in the same old Saxon spirit with ourselves, may be admitted to the rights of brotherhood which they have long deserved, and which it is we chiefly that suffer by withholding." This is a frank and earnest avowal of Carlyle's feeling that German literature could do much for the English, and his modest hope that his own work might help bring about a better knowledge and appreciation of it. Carlyle realized the mutual advantage of literary cosmopolitanism far more deeply than De Quincey ever did.

Most of De Quincey's works connected with the German sprang from the head rather than the heart. Some few bear the glowing mark of imagination, but for the most part they show what has been called the *wire-drawing* character of his

intellect. They represent the fag-end of his genius; the warmth and charm of the great prose articles in which he wrote from deep personal feeling are lacking here. His mind is working unsympathetically and crabbedly, because under nagging compulsion. In his impassioned prose he is to be wondered at; but here he is more to be pitied, as Carlyle pitied him.

WALTER Y. DURAND.